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DISCUSSION

ALLEYS

BY MRS ALBION FELLOWS BACON

DR. EDWARD T. DEVINE presiding

Monday afternoon, June 5, at three o'clock

MR. EDWARD T. DEVINE:

In taking the chair I would like to defend my friend, Mr. Riis, from the charge of being responsible for any tenement houses in Philadelphia, and to say that if any architect built a tenement as the result of what he heard Mr. Riis say on the subject, it must be that he heard Mr. Riis talk in his sleep or that he had an inverted ear trumpet. I once asked him to address a gathering in Philadelphia on the subject of model tenements, and his reply was one that burned the mail sacks all the way from New York to Philadelphia.

MR. FRANK ALDRICH, Superintendent of Street Cleaning and Garbage Collection, Detroit:

This is a very interesting subject to me, as I come from a city that has more miles of alleys than any other city in the world. I think we have the reputation of having the cleanest streets of any city. We have a limitless quantity of water and we flush our streets. But the alley problem has worried us a great deal.

For the last five years every annual report of the department of public works has called the attention of the people to the fact that it is an impossibility for the department to keep the alleys clean without the coöperation of the people. We have on our roll about 250 men and 150 teams for the purpose of cleaning the alleys, but 460,000 people can throw out more dirt than that number of men and teams can possibly remove.

I am glad that during the last month there has been an agitation started in Detroit that is arousing the people to the necessity of doing something. We have received a great deal of criticism because our alleys are dirty, and I was glad of this

revolution that has been started to arouse the people; it will teach them that it is necessary for them to take part in keeping the alleys clean.

Three years ago we had an ordinance covering the whole alley-cleaning problem, which required the people to remove all the ashes and waste at their own expense. The men who formerly did that work charged such exorbitant prices to the cottager for removing a few bushels of ashes or waste that it was an impossibility for him to pay it, and that ordinance became practically obsolete. Finally, the department of public works commenced the removal of ashes from behind the cottages alone and later extended it to all residences, but there was no regular system and we felt that we needed an ordinance that would direct the work in a systematic way. The new ordinance was passed by the common council, which said: "If you want your ashes taken away free of expense the department of public works will take them, provided that you put them in a receptacle and place the receptacle in a convenient place where it can be handled." Unfortunately the people had been so used to throwing rubbish into the alleys that they thought we were infringing upon their rights and the ordinance could not be enforced, though the police brought a great many persons into court for violating it.

About a year and a half ago the department of public works asked the council to amend the ordinance so that the people could place their ashes and waste in the alleys in every month except January and February. People kept their ashes in the cellar all winter, and this spring, as soon as the warm weather came, thousands deposited all their ashes and refuse in one week in the alleys and thus caused a bad condition and much complaint. Our board of commerce took hold of the matter and advised the citizens that in order to have clean alleys they must use judgment in what they deposited in the alleys. The board of health helped agitate the question of coöperation with the department of public works and tried to arouse the pride of citizens in keeping the alleys in proper condition back of their premises. Because this large accumulation of ashes was thrown into the alleys in so short a period of time we have been obliged

to haul away during the last three weeks more than 1500 cubic yards of dirt and ashes per day.

MR. JORDAN:

We, in Boston, are troubled with this alley question. We have a great number of alleys in Boston and we find the same trouble about people throwing out ashes and papers and rubbish into those back alleys. In 1894 a law was passed giving the board of health the right to call upon the abutters to have the alleys paved and drained. That worked all right until about three years ago, and we had some of those alleys paved and drained. At that time we asked to have an alley off State street paved, which affected some of the wealthiest men in the city of Boston, and they immediately carried the question to the supreme court of Massachusetts, which decided that the law was unconstitutional. Since that time we have had to stop work.

We find trouble in cleaning alleys in this way; under our law in Boston the owners are obliged to have the alleys cleaned. There are very few of the owners that live in the houses that abut on those alleys; nearly all live out of town. They formerly lived in these houses which now have been turned into lodging houses and tenements, the owners living out of town. In a great many instances they live out of the country, so you see how difficult it is to reach them. There is no other way to clean up except by calling upon the owners to do it.

For a number of years, I think for the last fifteen years, there has been no annual report of the board of health which has not called upon the "city fathers" to pass some sort of ordinance or law whereby the city can go in and clean those alleys, and make it a lien on the property. We never have been able to have that law passed. I think every year for the last ten years we have gone to the legislature of Massachusetts, either directly or indirectly, through some of the civic associations, to have a law passed in regard to taking care of those alleys, but up to date there has been no law passed whereby anything can be done.

MR. MAGRUDER :

Baltimore has been given a rather unenviable reputation at almost every session of this conference. I want to say that in that city there has been a development indicative of splendid possibilities, for which the alley itself furnishes an opportunity. We have miles and miles of rows of houses right on the building line, with no front yards, and with correspondingly big back yards, forty or fifty or sixty or seventy feet deep, with an alley. These yards are twelve or sixteen or sometimes twenty feet wide, and each yard is fenced about with a high board fence, so that we have acres and acres of ground fenced in in this long, narrow way. A westerner who came from a pork-packing city to Baltimore not long since looking out over the expanse of back yards said : " Dear me, this looks like the stock yards. "

In certain neighborhoods, however, the property owners have seen an opportunity and have voluntarily entered into an agreement among themselves that they will tear down the partition fences, leaving only the outside fences at the end of the block and the fences along the alley, separating their several lots by vine-covered chicken-wire fences stretched along the posts that are left standing. That has been so vast an improvement in beauty and comfort that they have begun to tear down these partition fence lines, leaving a large open yard for the whole block, and that has been so satisfactory that they are beginning to tear down all the fences, leaving no line of division except as the paved alley might be taken as a line of separation. That in turn brings to the front the alley itself as Mrs. Bacon has described, and as nobody is satisfied with the appearance of the revolting thing, it looks as if the city might gradually develop out of this a splendid system of yards, no longer back yards but front yards. There is one back yard in Baltimore that you cannot tell from a front yard, because people live out there, and it is as green as any beautiful lawn, with flower beds and bushes of the right kind, and with trees here and there. In fact it is a delightfully green spot where the neighborhood people assemble. This is taken as a prophecy of things to be in a city cursed with an alley system, the alley itself furnishing an opportunity of doing that which would be otherwise impossible.

MR. OLMSTED :

It seems to me that the point upon which most of the difficulties turn is the presence of *private* alleys. The difficulties in Boston are mainly with the private alleys rather than with those which are public alleys and are maintained by the city like the other streets. And this brings me back to a point I made in my own paper early in the afternoon. The alley is likely to become an intermediate street with houses fronting upon it, to meet changing conditions in any given district. It ought to be completely under public control just the same as the main streets, and sufficient space ought to be set apart and put under public control in the beginning in the middle of the block to provide for the reasonable contingencies of the future. Whether or not the alley is needed at the start for the kind of development there proposed, sufficient room should be reserved to permit the introduction of alleys when the conditions arise for which a public alley is desirable, and to permit the conversion of that alley into an intermediate street for the frontage of an additional row of buildings when that change becomes desirable, when it is no longer economical, possible or desirable to maintain large areas of open back lots. Where conditions are like those described at a certain place in Baltimore, where the middle of the block can be used in common for large garden plots, and the people can afford it, it is eminently desirable. But these conditions must be temporary or exceptional, for in many parts of Baltimore land is so expensive that only the very rich can afford to hold these big back yards vacant, and economic pressure has forced the erection of houses facing on the alleys.

My main point is that there ought to be complete control by the public of some space through the middle of the ordinary block which can be left in private use temporarily, but can be taken over by the city whenever the conditions require, made public and policed and maintained and kept in good order by the city. The condition which we have in Boston and elsewhere in regard to private alleys would not then arise. They are not maintained in sanitary condition by the people they belong to, and the city cannot get the right to maintain them without going through very complicated and uncertain legal proceedings.